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SUBJECT: AFTERMATH OF SECTARIAN STRIFE IN ALEXANDRIA

REF: CAIRO 2267

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Alexandria has been peaceful since the April 14 attacks and April 15-16 clashes reported reftel. There continues to be considerable speculation about whether the man who was arrested after the fatal church attacks was operating alone. Protesters in Alexandria on April 16 as well as a nationalist member of Parliament have accused the USG of interfering in Egyptian domestic politics. The Parliament and the National Council for Human Rights have launched inquiries into the violence. President Mubarak has called for national unity and tolerance. In a late-breaking development Pope Shenouda III has indicated that he will not travel to Alexandria for his customary Holy Week visit. Many observers are looking toward Friday, April 21 (which will be Good Friday according to the Orthodox calendar, as well as the Muslim day of prayer) as an indicator of whether this latest sectarian crisis has passed. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) There has been a noticeably high-profile security presence in Alexandria, particularly around churches, since the GOE managed to contain sectarian demonstrations and clashes on April 16. In addition to the arrested suspect in the April 14 slaying (a young Muslim man, Mahmoud Salaheddin Abdul Razzak, accused in the murder of the aged Noshi Atta Guirgis, a Christian), the GOE has arrested more than 50 persons (both Muslim and Christian) suspected of participating in sectarian riots on April 15-16. The GOE's Public Prosecutor in Alexandria has launched a formal investigation into the murder of Guirgis.

¶3. (SBU) Initial speculation by many GOE critics--that it was highly implausible that the accused killer could have acted alone--now seems to be diminishing. There have been several reliable media reports that suspect Mahmoud Abdul Razzak did indeed have a history of mental illness, and had previously made threats against Christians and churches in Alexandria. Adel Hamouda, the editor of the influential opposition weekly Al-Fagr, has reported that Abdul Razzak had in fact been released from GOE detention last year after his mother appealed to the Coptic Church, which interceded on Abdul Razzak's behalf with the GOE. Note: Knowledgeable Christian contacts of the Embassy have not been able to confirm Hamouda's public assertion that Abdul Razzak was released after the church's intercession. End note. Despite the new details that are emerging about the accused's background, other observers continue to insist that Abdul Razzak must have had co-conspirators, or at least accomplices, to conduct the three separate attacks. Certain statements by Church officials as well as the Ministry of Interior about the need to prosecute any and all "perpetrators" in the slaying have further fueled the

suspicion that an additional suspect(s) remains at large.

¶4. (SBU) In another development, on the evening of April 16, a crowd of more than 1000 (both Muslims and Christians) demonstrated peacefully in Alexandria, calling for calm and national unity. Some in the crowd, however, shouted slogans denouncing USG intervention in Egypt's internal affairs. Comment: Nationalist Egyptian critics of the USG's support for religious freedom in Egypt have in the past protested that the USG is "taking the side of the Copts." For example, in late 2005, when Coptic activists convened a conference in Washington to discuss religious freedom and democracy in Egypt, the nationalist-xenophobic element in Egypt's media denounced the meeting as an example of USG interference in Egypt's internal affairs, simply on the basis that the meeting took place in Washington. End comment.

¶5. (SBU) Maverick independent parliamentarian, Mustafa Al-Bakry, editor of the tabloid weekly Al-Osbua, has also decried what he alleges is USG "interference" (i.e, the USG reaction to the Alexandria violence). Other MPs have announced the formation of a special committee to look into the events in Alexandria. The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) has also announced that it too will hold an inquiry into the attacks.

¶6. (SBU) In an April 18 meeting with parliamentarians, in his first public remarks on the events in Alexandria, President Mubarak stated that the Egyptian people have lived throughout their history not differentiating between Muslim and Christian, all living in peace, with common pains, common ideas, a common past and a common future, and added that no force could affect this national unity. Mubarak further stressed the sanctity of places of worship, and asserted that the Egyptian people have always believed that "religion is for God while the nation is for everyone." Also, late on April 18, Church contacts informed us that Pope Shenouda III, who has spent the Holy Week in his customary prayer and contemplation at the Wadi Natroun monastery, will not be traveling to Alexandria, as has been his past practice, for an Easter week service. Comment: Although the reasons behind Shenouda's decision to remain in Wadi Natroun are not clear, we suspect that many observers will interpret his actions as some sort of protest or signal to the GOE. End comment.

¶7. (SBU) Looking ahead, the Minister for Religious Endowments, Hamdi Zaqzouq, has urged the nation's Muslim preachers to devote their sermons on Friday, April 21 to the subject of Egypt's national unity and long history of religious tolerance. Many Egyptians, both Christian and Muslim, will be watching closely to see if indeed April 21 (Orthodox Good Friday and the Muslim day of prayer) passes peacefully.  
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